**Rev. David Kraemer and Meg Whaley**

**Lessons and Carols for Christmas Eve**

**John 1:1-5**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

**Reflection: Words**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Words are all I have to offer. That’s pretty much who I am. My wireless network at home is named Words are My Life. If you visit I will tell you the password. What I believe is that words are all we have to offer. As people, words make us unique. And words are everything.

In the beginning, the word was spoken into the void, and the word gave shape to gasses and stars and comets and planets. And on the planets – or at least one that we know of – the word gave shape to trees and oceans, clouds and rain, fish and birds and grasses.

And into the world, a child is born – actually 4.3 of them every second -- And in that baby’s first moments, as the light begins to filter into filmy eyes, as breath moves through its body, the first things it hears are words, the words of its mother or father, or the midwife, or the nurses or the doctor, or even the language of life itself. And the words begin to give shape to things almost instantly – to form and movement, to the crib and the door, to faces, and to other people.

In the beginning was the Word, which in the book of John came to mean Christ, the Word in the Flesh, and Christ was with God, and Christ was God. They were the same thing. Whatever was of the one was of the other. Is that true? I don’t know. The word we translate from the Greek is logos, which also can mean rational structure. In the beginning was rational structure and rational structure was Christ and Christ was God. So John is doing a little alchemy here, mashing together the ancient Greeks with Christianity, giving birth to Western thought. Word, Logos, Christ, God – all one thing, in one word. Words are everything. The words are all we have to offer. They shape the world, they shape who we are.

In this service today, we will offer words at the altar of our existence, words to give shape to our lives. Some of the words we will say tonight will come from the Word, that’s with a capital W, which in our culture means the Bible. Some of the words we say will come from other speakers, from me, or other books, because in our tradition of Unitarian Universalism, everything can be the Bible, everything, and every baby, is holy, everything is the Word.

**Luke 2: 1-7**

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.

While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

**Reflection: Vulnerability**

The story begins in hardship. The government wants you to come to the next county, though you have no money for gas or even a decent car. But you have to go, to show some paperwork, some documentation, so that you can have the privilege of paying taxes, taxes that feed the militarized police force that occupies your cities. You are paying for your own misery.

When you get there you will have to stay in some dive because you can’t afford to pay for a regular hotel, you will stay with animals, because that’s how we treat you, too.

Never mind that you are pregnant, you will be thrown in jail if you fail to show up for your hearing, and if you are not a Roman it’s going to be even worse for you, because that’s who we lock up, the non-Romans, the disadvantaged, the occupied people.

And into this world, a child is born. Breath comes to its body. And soft words are spoken. The baby is wiped clean and wrapped tight. And it is no wonder we come to worship this birth because birth itself is hope.

The miracle is not the virgin birth, the miracle is that a baby is born at all. How unlikely, how improbable. How do they do that? Start breathing and all, as if they have been doing it all their lives.

Maybe 700 years before this, the prophet Isaiah, who was living in similar circumstances, in oppression and occupation, seeks to comfort his people, to give them hope, and he writes:

3A voice cries out:
“In the wilderness prepare the way
    make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
4Every valley shall be lifted up,
    and every mountain and hill be made low;
…5Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
    …

Does Isaiah really predict the birth of Jesus? Was God writing a chapter a day, the last one yet to come? I don’t know. What I do know is that Isaiah was offering words, helping his people find shape and meaning.

6A voice says, “Cry out!”
    And I said, “What shall I cry?”
All people are grass,
    their constancy is like the flower of the field.
7… 8The grass withers, the flower fades;
    but the word … will stand forever.”

**Luke 2: 8-14**

In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.”

**Reflection: Revelation**

This is a crazy scene – a bunch of shepherds camped out on a hill, we like to think of them as cowboys around a fire, kind of romantic, but really, maybe more like homeless men under a tarp in the woods behind the Shopko, guys that responsible people don’t want to talk to. And all of a sudden they are visited by an unidentified preaching object, with lights blaring and maybe a loudspeaker, and it scares the bejesus out of them.

Actually the shepherds are not quite homeless men. They do have jobs, and some status in the social order. There will be other lessons about the truly disenfranchised in Jesus’ lifetime. But even so these shepherds do help equalize the situation.

Mary Beth Danielson wrote column a few years ago she called “Interview with a Shepherd” who was actually a dairy farmer.

“If you want to locate a person in Wisconsin who spends a lot of time outdoors taking care of animals, forget shepherds,” she writes. “Look for a dairy farmer.”

Her farmer, named Jim, was full of pithy wisdom of the kind that comes from sitting on a tractor for long periods of time

“In nature everything has its realm and you learn to respect that.  I never tried to cut corners because it seemed to me that if you did things right, it would come out better in the end.”

“It takes several years of working a piece of ground before you know it, so you've got to be patient while you learn what you need to know.  Once you know it, it will stay with you, and you'll do alright.”

"If you get to harvest and you can't seem to get everything done, then you got one of two problems. Either you planted too much or your equipment isn't big enough."

And "Life is always changing.  You've got to expect that and not get upset at it all the time."

This scene of the shepherds and the angels, and the interview with Jim, mean to me that truth comes not just to a privileged few, not just to scholars or priest, or eggheads like me, but to regular people. People in whom some humility lives. In fact truth might even favor those people. Good news comes to those who need it. All of us might remember this, and care for all those with whom we share the journey.

**Luke 2: 15-20**

 When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

**Reflection: Witness**

When I worked in Iowa with canoeists and kayakers, and eventually water conservationists, we started our clubs with the intention of just getting people out on the water. It was really quite enjoyable, and surprising, because you don’t think of Iowa as a kayak destination.

But once people got out there, they saw how beautiful it was, how plentiful the rivers, how much they teemed with wildlife, how the seasons bring mood and color, and how every river has a soul.

And also, how impacted they are by the effects of agriculture, and decades of trash, aspects that did not lessen the enjoyment but added a note of deeper understanding.

 And then something happened to people almost automatically. Upon witnessing the degradation of the resource they began finding ways to do something about it – they started massive annual cleanup efforts that hauled out water heaters and car parts and thousands of old tires, and they lobbied the DNR to start a water trails program to increase access, to get more people out to witness, and they worked with other conservation organizations to encourage farmers to not plant crops right up to the edge of the water, or to run fences across streams, or let their cows run down in the water.

Witness led to advocacy and advocacy led to change.

The shepherds, -- after getting over their visit from the evangelist from outer space – did what they were told and went to witness.

They went to show up and be amazed, to see how beautiful the baby was, and the mood and the color of Mary, and how every person has a soul.

They made known the statement which had been told them. And all who heard it wondered. And in this time of oppression and occupation, a resistance was born.

A resistance that would come to be lived in the life of Jesus, who preached a message of upheaval, and in the lives of his followers, who would we persecuted.

A resistance built on the words of the prophets, who told of a time when every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill laid low, and when justice shall roll down like waters and peace like an ever flowing stream.

Witness led to proclamation and proclamation led to change.

This passage invites us to witness, too. To show up. To be present. To make known what we have seen. To cry out. And prepare a way.

**Matthew 2: 1-3 & 9-11**

 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

 After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

**Reflection: Awe**

Walt Whitman writes:

On the beach at night alone,

As the old mother sways her to and fro singing her husky song,

As I watch the bright stars shining, I think a thought of the clef of the universes and of the future.

A vast similitude interlocks all,

All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets,

All distances of place however wide,

All distances of time, all inanimate forms,

All souls, all living bodies though they be ever so different, or in different worlds,

All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes, the fishes, the brutes,

All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages,

All identities that have existed or may exist on this globe, or any globe,

All lives and deaths, all of the past, present, future,

This vast similitude spans them, and always has spann'd,

And shall forever span them and compactly hold and enclose them.

Outside, at night, staring up at the sky, I am often filled with a feeling of being incredibly large, and infinitely small at the same time. It is a feeling of strength and a feeling of utter futility. A feeling of time not passing but being.

Stars inspire this. Is it any wonder?

We have been navigating by them for thousands of years. We owe our existence to one. We are, in fact, made up of star dust, infinitely small particles of the universe orbiting around a gravitational pull.

Stars glimmer like truth. Distant. But real.

They decorate the night sky like Christmas all year round. They give us hope. Even in this darkness, there is a tiny bit of light, distant energy, the promise that something else is out there, burning, hot, bright, alive.

Stars are a sign of life. They are necessary for life. In a cold, dark universe filled with rock and swirling gasses, life keeps popping up. In some tepid backwater somewhere, warmed by a star, amino acids combine, a lightning bolt strikes, or some other magic happens, and bam, life comes. From the murk and the mud, life, again and again. As unlikely, as improbable, as irrepressible, as a baby in a manger.

No wonder, a star stood over the place he was born. No wonder the magi brought gifts. They followed a star, a star filled with life, pointing to life, guiding, lighting, filling them with awe.

**Luke 4: 16-19**

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
    because he has anointed me
        to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
    and recovery of sight to the blind,
        to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

**Reflection: Intention**

Jesus began his teaching by recalling the prophecy of Isaiah. The story gains some continuity in this telling, some plot. Tonight we celebrate birth, and vulnerability, humble beginnings, and the shift that comes in looking for a savior not as king or a president but as an outsider, and salvation not as conquest but peace.

But it is important to remember that Jesus grew up. And it was his life that causes us to consider his birth. The scriptures, in our telling, trace a line from the prophets of the Old Testament to this prophet of the New Testament not because Amos and Isaiah could somehow tell the future but because Jesus could pick up on the message.

And what does he say he will do?

Bring good news to the poor.

Release the captives.

Give sight to the blind.

Lift up the oppressed.

And if you read just a few lines further into this passage from Luke, you see that he speaks truth to power, and they don’t like it.

 They drive him from the city, no prophet in his hometown, and they would have killed him had he not slipped away.

We are reminded of the struggle that was Jesus’ life, and the intention that he brought to it anyway.

That’s the intention of this story, it is why we keep telling it.

In the words of Howard Thurman:

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flock,

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among people,

To make music in the heart**.**